
Beyond the Metropolis: The Forgotten History of Small-Town Teachers' Unions

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This article examines the legal and political significance of teacher unionization in rural and suburban school districts between 1960 and 1975. While most historians focus on the growth of unions in urban areas, strikes in outlying districts played a determinative role in the development of public sector labor law, particularly in the arbitration of professional rights and democratic oversight. After summarizing the relationship between unions and school boards in rural and suburban school districts, the article describes the legal impact of teacher strikes in those areas. It concludes with a discussion of the changes to public sector labor law during the 1970s and a brief reflection on the importance of small-town teachers' unions today.

Over the past 50 years, the expansion of teachers' unions has become one of the most vexing issues in American education. At the heart of the matter is whether public oversight is compatible with professional autonomy. Critics characterize unionized teachers (and public employees generally) as a parasitic interest group. Through collective bargaining and the threat of strikes, they allege, public unions inflate tax rates, shield members from voter scrutiny, and undermine the power of elected representatives, impeding not only the operation of the free market but the function of democracy itself. Supporters counter that public workers have often been exploited in the name of low taxes and, by counterbalancing conservative groups that would gut government regulation and funding for services like education, that unions actually safeguard the public good. Moreover, they insist that unionized teachers are professionals whose training entitles them to make curricular and pedagogical decisions without political interference, a claim that opponents vigorously dispute. To understand current debates about teacher unionization, one must first recognize these underlying, contradictory conceptions of democracy.

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Although teachers' unions have existed since the turn of the twentieth century, the proximate causes of today's conflicts date to the 1960s, when growing membership and militancy led to bitter confrontations between unions and school boards. The era's first major strike took place in New York City in 1962. In 1968, a more divisive clash in New York's Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood—over issues of hiring and community control—closed the city's schools for weeks. Scholars have documented similar standoffs in Chicago, Detroit, and elsewhere. One should note that all of these incidents took place in major cities, where the size and political power of the teaching force ascribes them self-evident significance. In focusing on such cases, however, historians have neglected the growth of teacher unions outside metropolitan areas, a topic crucial to understanding the conflict between professional rights and democratic governance.¹

Rural and suburban districts were slow to feel the effects of an organized teaching force. Thousands of them continued to operate one-room schoolhouses as late as the 1960s, in defiance of state campaigns for district consolidation, and voters in these areas stridently defended local prerogative against teachers and administrators. When consolidation finally opened the door to unionized faculties, small-town residents campaigned, both locally and at the state level, to restrict professional influence over personnel, curriculum, and funding decisions. As a result, the very features that have led scholars of unionization to overlook small districts—their lack of numbers or power, the presumed conservatism and winner-take-all structure of small-town politics—often put the same districts at the forefront of antiunion activism, leading to bitter litigation and an outsized impact on public sector labor law.²

The outcome of those cases was mixed. Through the 1970s, courts generally preserved the administrative power of school boards, while at the same time holding them accountable to established labor protocols and liberalizing teachers' right to strike. In several states, courts decided cases in favor of local boards even as the acrimony of small-town disputes impelled legislators to loosen restrictions on collective bargaining and strikes at the state level. Unionization outside the metropolis was thus a contentious and highly publicized issue that yielded ambiguous results: small districts enabled the dramatic growth of public employee unions through their legal precedents, even as they united a new coalition of conservative opponents around the rhetoric of democratic participation. By reconfiguring the legal and political basis of teacher unionization, small school districts helped shape the antiunion politics of our own time. For

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the same reasons, they might also provide new ways to think about professional rights and public interests in the future.

Political, Legal, and Geographical Context

One cannot understand small-town teacher unions apart from the politics, law, and geography of American education generally. Before discussing the impact of the unions themselves, then, a few words of explanation are in order about the background and scope of this article.

First, one should recognize antiunion sentiment as part of a broader conservative campaign to defend “local control” of schools. For most of American history, locally elected school boards made almost all decisions about curriculum, funding, and staffing; state governments mandated public education but lacked the infrastructure to meaningfully regulate it, while education’s omission from the US Constitution limited federal involvement altogether.³ That arrangement began to change during the early twentieth century, as liberal policymakers began to recognize the connections between school quality, civic participation, and economic growth. By the 1910s, coalitions of education associations, corporate foundations, and social welfare reformers were lobbying legislatures to increase thresholds for school funding and teacher preparation, the first steps toward greater state oversight. Their efforts wrought profound changes in the countryside. One-room school districts, unable to meet the new standards, gradually but inexorably closed. Of the 200,000 in existence in 1915, only 1,200 remained by 1975. In their place rose larger, age-graded schools with certified teachers and professional administrators, supervised by centralized school boards and state departments of education—a more modern, efficient, and urban system, proponents argued, albeit one increasingly abstracted from parents and local taxpayers.⁴

Compensating for the loss of local participation was a dramatic rise in state and federal funding. State support for schools rose from \$1 trillion to \$31.8 trillion nationwide between 1945 and 1975, while the passage of the National Defense Education Act (1958) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) boosted federal contributions from \$41 million to \$6.3 billion. Although consolidated districts and wider tax bases also raised the amount of local spending, property tax revenues fell as a proportion of overall expenditures—from 64% to 46.5%—lessening the tax burden on landowners while opening the door to new systems of top-down, bureaucratic oversight.⁵ Court rulings both paralleled and drove the expansion of state and federal policies. With *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court demonstrated its willingness to scrutinize the actions of local school boards, introducing a legal standard of “equal educational opportunity” that reshaped not only schools’ racial composition but even-

tually their systems of funding, languages of instruction, and accessibility to students with mental or physical disabilities. Passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) made compliance with these rulings a prerequisite for federal funding, subjecting local prerogative to further regulation.⁶

Often overlooked is the connection between civil rights enforcement and earlier campaigns for rural school consolidation. Consolidation was the first and most successful subordination of local control to state oversight, and just as larger districts had increased opportunities for children in the countryside, liberals hoped that consolidation could equalize schools in the “slums and suburbs” of metropolitan America.⁷ During a brief period in the late 1960s, state and federal courts agreed with them, ordering the merger of some urban and suburban school districts to achieve racial balance and to equalize funding. Suburban conservatives, furious with what they considered judicial overreach, mobilized through mass action and the ballot box: they held students out of school, organized public demonstrations, and pressured local, state, and national representatives to stop interdistrict reforms. Their efforts culminated in a campaign to recapture the judiciary. Richard Nixon, elected in 1968 on the strength of suburban votes, appointed four conservatives to the Supreme Court between 1969 and 1971, including Chief Justice Warren Burger. Yet suburbanites still needed legal grounds to shield their districts from state intervention. They found them on their outer borders. Lingering opposition to rural school consolidation offered suburban communities what contemporaries on the Left might have called a “usable past”: a language, symbolism, and authenticity—and most importantly a grounded legal basis—for renewed assertions of local government. In cases like *San Antonio v. Rodriguez* (1973) and *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), litigants invoked memories of the one-room schoolhouse to reject systems of equalized funding and race-based busing across district boundaries, and federal courts accepted their rationale. While educational equality was a state interest, Justice Burger wrote, “substantial local control of public education in this country is a deeply rooted tradition.”⁸ These landmark decisions underscore the importance of small-town districts in educational law. Because of the vague delineations between “rural,” “small-town,” and “suburban” areas, calls for local control passed easily from farm communities to affluent suburbs, hardening the boundaries between suburbs and cities by blurring their distinctions with the countryside. Thus, if the following article’s distinctions between rural and suburban areas at times seem imprecise, that is partly the point: small school districts became a bulwark against state oversight precisely because they encompassed a range of different communities.

Yet while the Court’s defense of local prerogative halted efforts to desegregate or equalize funding between school districts, it was only a partial victory for conservatives—and on this point teachers’ unions represent a crucial caveat. Scholars have described the Burger Court as an “incomplete counter-

revolution,” for despite a general shift to the right, its justices also affirmed or expanded many of the civil liberties established by their predecessors, including legal protections for teachers and students. These rulings, combined with those of lower courts, provided an opening for teachers to organize, increasing their leverage in debates over funding and curriculum and leaving unresolved fundamental tensions between community governance and professional rights. Thus, the judiciary’s inconsistent commitment to local control in the 1970s yielded districts increasingly segregated by race and class on the one hand, and on the other increasingly beholden to professional, state, and federal demands. One could say that schools kept the worst aspects of local control even as they lost the democratic participation that was its most redeeming feature.⁹

Finally, in addition to their impact on educational debates, one must understand the position of rural teachers’ unions in the history and geography of the labor movement as a whole. Unions were the backbone of the New Deal coalition and enjoyed steady expansion once the Wagner Act (1935) established rights to collective bargaining and fair labor practices. Yet public employees were excluded from the act’s provisions. It took another 25 years of organizing and lobbying to extend union membership to federal workers in 1962, and subsequent campaigns for the recognition of state and local employees, which gave teachers access to collective bargaining. By then, the Taft-Hartley Act (1947) had already begun to undermine labor’s foothold in the private sector. Passed with strong support from the business community, the Taft-Hartley Act let states implement “right-to-work” laws, which prohibited compulsory, “closed-shop” union membership. As factories closed in the rusting cities of the North, attempts to organize blue-collar workers in “right-to-work” states of the South and West generally failed.¹⁰ Public employees managed to unionize in those areas, but they did so without the support of industrial unions and often without the right to strike. As a result, while this article draws examples from across the country, its narrative generally tracks with the geography of the labor movement, concentrated in the Northeast and Midwest (see fig. 2). Teachers experienced profound hostility in the small towns of these regions as well, but they had sufficient support from legislators and state organizations there to challenge local school boards.

While this is a national story with regional emphasis, in order to provide greater continuity and specificity, it is also the story of small-town unions in one state: Wisconsin. No state is perfectly representative when it comes to educational politics: different demographics, traditions, and structures of government ensure that the extent and pace of school reform vary widely across the country. Nevertheless, Wisconsin has several qualities to recommend it. First, it was ideologically variable. Milwaukee, the state’s largest city, was a stronghold of the labor movement, with a strong socialist presence from the 1910s to the 1950s. Outlying areas usually voted Republican, but under that label could

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swinging from the right-wing populism of Senator Joseph McCarthy to the small-town progressivism of “fighting Bob” LaFollette. As in other northern states, Democrats began making inroads during the late 1950s, winning the governorship and, with William Proxmire and Gaylord Nelson, holding both Senate seats through the 1980s. But they met sharp resistance from suburban conservatives, who threw their support behind segregationist George Wallace in 1968 and 1972 and comprised the backbone of the right-wing John Birch Society, which moved its headquarters to Appleton in the 1980s. Political clashes were especially strong around organized labor, with the state alternating between progressive labor policies—it became the first in the country to allow public workers to bargain, in 1959—and anti-labor activism.¹¹ This article is largely based on materials from the Wisconsin Historical Society, as well as the archives of the National Education Association (NEA) at George Washington University and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) at Wayne State University, as well as the holdings of several other state historical societies.

Unionization Outside the Metropolis

For most of American history, the professional status of teachers in rural and suburban districts differed markedly from those in the city. By the mid-nineteenth century, educational reformers had forcibly consolidated urban districts to forge a system of age-graded schools, replacing corporal punishment and individualized curriculum with emulative competition and hierarchical organization from elementary to high school. The separation of young children, particularly, facilitated the transition to a largely female workforce that was not only less expensive but also more willing to pursue specialized training.¹² Urban and state-level reforms turned teaching into a profession, with stricter licensing requirements based on claims to specialized knowledge and practice. Despite low pay and limited autonomy, local teacher organizations defended their professional gains through self-segregation—based on race, gender, and instructional level—and strict abstention from strikes. A growing number of these organizations also affiliated with the National Education Association or the American Federation of Teachers to lobby for more training, tenure rights, and school funding. Together they soon comprised a vocal education lobby.¹³

These changes took longer to reach the countryside, where through the early 1900s teaching remained a part-time job suited to transients or young women biding their time until marriage. Opportunities for professional development increased as states raised certification requirements—and as university extensions and normal schools began to offer rural residents access to postsecondary education—but a commitment to local control and single-teacher schools impeded meaningful curricular reform or organization among rural teachers.¹⁴

Stanford University professor Ellwood Cubberley castigated rural teachers as “almost entirely ignorant of . . . science” and “those qualities of leadership so essential in rural progress,” while the NEA issued dozens of papers condemning the low pay and lack of professional development available to them.¹⁵ In the city, professionalization occurred after schools consolidated, but that was not the case in small districts, where school boards grudgingly hired better-trained teachers in response to rising standards but resisted consolidation until the 1950s and 1960s, when loopholes closed and curricular requirements became too difficult to fulfill in single-school districts. By that time it was easy for critics to cast statewide teachers’ unions as the instigators and primary beneficiaries of rural school consolidation. Many argued that NEA affiliates wanted to close small schools not to improve academic quality but merely “so they can unionize them,” and that “control of teachers [depended] on large, urban-type schools” and weakening ties to the local community.¹⁶ For their part, union leaders charged that “small districts are shot through with cronyism and paternalism and employee fear and distrust.” Even after they were consolidated, the NEA repeatedly encountered aggressive assertions of community control, which put local union leaders at risk of dismissal and blacklisting under almost any pretext, with predictably cooling effects on local organizing.¹⁷

The story of unionization in Wisconsin illustrates these changes, which were underway nationally in the decades after World War II. The Wisconsin Education Association (later changed to the Wisconsin Education Association Council, or WEAC) was founded in 1853 as the state’s primary professional organization, followed in 1919 by the much smaller Wisconsin Federation of Teachers (WFT), which became the first statewide federation of the AFT. Before the 1960s both organizations had the majority of their affiliates in urban centers. WEAC offered resources for rural teachers but organized only a single local outside the state’s larger cities. The WFT tried to organize outlying districts during the Great Depression but faltered in 1939, when the Wisconsin legislature stripped tenure rights from 6,500 teachers in rural schools, a concession to school boards as the state took its first steps toward district consolidation. Through the 1940s and 1950s, it was difficult for unions to gain a foothold in small districts. Common were experiences like those of 18 teachers at Spooner High School in 1946, who were threatened with dismissal after affiliating with the WFT. The school board only ended up firing six of the teachers but pointedly included the two union officers.¹⁸

Overrepresentation in the statehouse allowed rural legislators to forestall the final stages of district consolidation until 1959, when Wisconsin finally tied state funding to the operation of a high school, undermining small districts and essentially outlawing the one-room schoolhouse. The number of districts in the state fell by a factor of 10 between 1950 and 1965, from 5,445 to 572. The number of students in small rural schools fell as precipitously: while in 1959

there were 28,443 students in single-school districts, there were only 1,695 by 1965.¹⁹ Coincidentally, 1959 was also the year that Wisconsin authorized collective bargaining for public workers. As a result, the number of local WEAC associations nearly tripled over the next 15 years, growing from 99 to 269 affiliates. Membership grew rapidly as well, from 21,000 members in the state association and only 2,756 in the national in 1945, to over 46,000 members in each by 1975. Whereas in 1950 most unionized districts could be found in the industrialized corridors along Lake Michigan and the Fox River Valley, by the mid-1960s union locals fanned out across the state. A quick glance at the number of teacher associations bearing regional names (such as the Wisconsin Heights Association of Teachers, in Mazomanie) or hyphenated names (such as the Rosendale-Brandon or Delavan-Darien Education Associations) underscores how many of these unions were appearing in recently consolidated districts, many with less than 50 full-time employees (see fig. 1).²⁰

Unionized teachers were often the first representatives of organized labor in rural and suburban communities, where opponents of school consolidation saw their growth as a direct threat to local democracy. To resist them, residents tapped into the stream of antiunion literature propagated by conservative business interests or right-wing groups like the John Birch Society. As early as 1963, book clubs in rural Wisconsin were reading Ayn Rand's *Objectivist Newsletter* (1961) and materials from the Foundation for Economic Education, as well as anticonsolidation materials.²¹ Their opposition to organized labor registered with local teachers. One union member replied warily when asked why his affiliate had refused to support a strike in a nearby district: "I come from an association with only 70 people," he said, "and there is a lot of insecurity when you only have 70 people. When we saw that Milwaukee wasn't going to go out [in support], we didn't want to stick our neck out." The union also refused to stick its neck out when angry parents used the incident to intimidate the district's English and sex education teachers: controversial materials were dropped without debate. Another teacher remarked that he remained "very much an outsider" in his town, despite working there for 15 years. Others said it was "difficult [negotiating] at a small school," where teachers "were working from weakness."²²

Although expressions of antiunion sentiment varied from place to place, they tended to recur around issues of school spending and curricular control. Tax hikes were a primary concern to small-town residents, not only because unionized teachers demanded better salaries and benefits but because they lobbied for new school facilities that many voters were unwilling to finance. Control of the curriculum also generated friction, as guarantees for tenure and academic freedom enabled teachers to include controversial material over the protests of community members.



Fig. 1.—A, WEAC affiliates 1945; B, WEAC affiliates 1955; C, WEAC affiliates 1965; D, WEAC affiliates 1975.

Objections to the cost and content of modern education mixed easily with hostility to organized teachers. A mother in Kimberly, Wisconsin, voiced a common sentiment when she wrote that “additional state financing is . . . viewed by most educators as the green light for increased salaries and more relaxed spending.” Contrasting her small school district with a larger one nearby, she argued that “higher salaries, modern equipment, and supplies have caused the cost of education to rise drastically, [but] *it does not follow that more dollars will*

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guarantee higher quality education." She continued: "The 'local control' issue . . . should be strengthened. The concept is already almost diluted out of existence by the effects of the teachers' unions, state agencies, courts, legislature. . . . Parents, after all, have the inherent right to govern and guard their children's education. With all the regimentation of requirements and 'professionalism-in-the-name-of-education,' the parent has been steadily excluded from the school process . . . and [yet] still expected to wholeheartedly finance more of the same."²³

One finds similar complaints elsewhere. In western Michigan in 1967, the Imlay City Federation of Teachers—describing itself as "the real, and only, labor movement we have in oustate Michigan"—negotiated a contract clause requiring the school board to "take advantage of federal funds available for special and remedial programs at all levels." Conservative board members ignored the clause when they canceled a local Head Start program, objecting in principle to federal involvement in education and to the district's responsibility for funding the project as subsidies tapered off. The union sued to continue the program, but a state court found in the board's favor, invalidating any contractual provision that impermissibly "controls or restricts . . . the free exercise of discretion for the public good vested in a public officer or board," especially in regard to expenditures.²⁴ Elsewhere, small-town residents used censorship campaigns to intimidate teachers and reassert community values following tax levies or successful union organizing.²⁵

Antunion activism was pervasive in small districts, but it was hardly confined to resentful farmers. In areas experiencing suburban growth, conservative newcomers echoed local resistance to unionized teachers, whom they feared would implement controversial curriculum or the sort of watered-down vocational classes then in vogue with progressive educators, or who might demand higher salaries and new facilities. Again, complaints varied from place to place—some activists supported new buildings, for instance, and opposed vocational courses because of their nonacademic content rather than their cost—but many newcomers worried that unions would shield teachers from the democratic control that made small school districts appealing in the first place. Thus, amid community change, population growth, and the modernization of curriculum and facilities, rural and suburban conservatives united to preserve local control by limiting teachers' salaries and their influence over school policies.

The confluence of suburban growth and the assertion of local control was evident outside Keene, New Hampshire, where in 1972 the school board revoked the principal's right to hire faculty, reprimanded teachers because of parent complaints, and fired the head of the teachers' association before breaking off all negotiations with the union.²⁶ Menominee, Michigan, struggling to accommodate rising enrollments, similarly rejected union negotiations until the press and public were allowed to observe them, claiming that community over-

sight was integral to the town's traditions of open government. Union representatives, accustomed to closed negotiations, refused to cooperate.²⁷ Between 1960 and 1970, the town of Millard, Nebraska—a farming village that had just consolidated adjacent one-room schoolhouses—grew from 1,012 to 7,460 residents and was targeted for annexation by the city of Omaha.²⁸ The school board, still dominated by rural representatives, denounced annexation as an attempt “to dissolve local government and to force the residents of the several school districts affected to join the Omaha System . . . merely for the sake of creating a larger district.” Voicing an argument increasingly common in suburban communities, they declared that “the school system should be locally controlled by residents of the area, and that local money should be expended on a local level rather than from a central headquarters.”²⁹ Although Omaha annexed the town of Millard in 1971, it failed to consolidate the school district, which still operates as a separate, suburban entity.³⁰ Thus, rather than joining the state’s largest public employees’ union, local teachers had to maintain their own smaller association. One member saw the very existence of a union as proof of the town’s “evolution from a small, rural, German community to a suburban area,” but nonetheless remembered “agricultural board members” who felt otherwise. “One simply did not question the decisions of the Board,” she recalled, and although the community generally approved building projects and pay raises, it maintained strict control over curricular and personnel decisions.³¹

Rural and suburban residents were not predestined to unite against teachers’ unions: issues of professionalism and academic freedom could cause friction both within and between the two groups. Particularly in districts where rural overrepresentation thwarted the wishes of suburban parents, unions could occasionally exploit divisions between voters and the school board, claiming the mantles of both professional freedom and popular support.³² Yet even when voters supported teachers against overreaching board members, they did so in the name of local democracy. In Bennington, Vermont, for instance, parents clashed with their union over the closure of one-room elementary schools (which were exempt from some certification requirements) but rallied to its defense when the superintendent and rural board members arbitrarily fired teachers and staff. Worried that such meddling might hurt instruction, they demanded the expansion of the school board from three to five members to ensure better representation.³³ A similar situation unfolded in Jefferson County, Idaho, where conservative board members used population growth to split a recently consolidated district in two, allowing them to void the union’s contract and fire teachers at will. Voters ousted the board’s leaders, whom they considered too antagonistic, but also passed a measure reaffirming that the local superintendent, a member of the Idaho Education Association, had no right to “[question] the actions of the local board.”³⁴ The school board in Keokuk, Iowa, had union leaders jailed for violating a strike injunction, but

conceded to their release when a majority of the townspeople took the union's side.³⁵ Thus, small-town voters were not inherently opposed to teachers' organizations. In districts adjusting to population growth and rapid educational reform, threats to democratic control from either direction invited public backlash. Nevertheless, teachers were more likely than school boards to run afoul of local opinion, especially when statewide unions seemed to use coercive tactics against elected officials.

From the teachers' perspective, coercion was necessary for dealing with intransigent school boards: extralocal intervention was the only way to establish meaningful professional authority. In addition to courting the support of union lawyers, negotiators, and canvassers, teachers in small districts also invited greater supervision from state departments of education and labor relations boards, which they hoped would curb contract violations and arbitrary dismissals. While teachers' interests did not always align with those of regulators either, the simple recognition of state authority in public labor disputes marked an important shift away from unfettered local control. It was for this reason that the president of the Michigan Federation of Teachers cheered her state labor board's inquiry into bargaining impasses. She reasoned that any decisions would necessarily come at the expense of local school authorities, since the board "was anxious to establish its power" in education disputes.³⁶

State oversight of labor practices established a firmer basis for the judicial scrutiny of school boards, as well as new mechanisms for resolving contract disputes. The most significant—and to school boards, the most intrusive—of these mechanisms was binding arbitration, in which courts or labor boards appointed a neutral party to investigate the source of disagreement and craft an equitable solution, to which both sides would be legally bound. Advocates of local control complained that such an arrangement discounted the decisions of duly elected representatives in favor of bureaucratic appointees, leaving school governance twice removed from the voters. The prospect of outside arbitration also encouraged new negotiating tactics, which, from the teachers' side, were bound to shift toward direct confrontation and mass action.

Sanctions, Strikes, and Democracy

Before the 1970s, the NEA sought to preserve its professional reputation by avoiding trade-union tactics and decertifying local associations that broke its no-strike pledge. When the AFT and some rogue locals struck during the 1940s, their militancy unleashed a wave of right-wing attacks and, in many states, legislation prescribing prison time for public employees who walked off the job. Although many teachers' unions won collective bargaining rights in the 1960s, striking remained illegal and salaries and benefits low. The NEA tried to deflect

public attention not only from strikes but from collective bargaining altogether, which it euphemistically referred to as “co-operative determination,” “collective determination,” or “professional negotiations.” Instead of striking in particular districts, the organization conducted surveys of state school systems and lobbied for broad-based increases in school funding. Framing educational quality as a statewide issue positioned teachers’ unions as a civic watchdog rather than a narrow interest group.³⁷ When legislatures did not cooperate, the NEA would impose sanctions, threatening mass resignations among its members and discouraging new teachers from taking jobs in the state. Although sanctions had to be applied selectively, the threat of bad publicity and widespread resignations proved effective during the early 1960s, when legislators in Utah and Oklahoma agreed to increase academic standards and school funding following NEA pressure campaigns.³⁸

The NEA used the same tactics against districts that it considered particularly retrograde in their labor practices. In a local context, however, statewide unions were regarded less as watchdogs than as outside bullies, and often met with resistance. A typical situation occurred on the island of Nantucket, a popular vacation spot off the Massachusetts coast, where residential growth doubled student enrollment between 1945 and 1955, forcing classes to meet in the post office, private garages, and even an idle tugboat.³⁹ The school board (in Massachusetts called a “committee”) invited a team of Harvard University researchers to survey the island’s education system and recommend strategies to manage growth. The team’s final report reflected the era’s assumptions about school quality. It recommended more vocational courses and, despite sharp resistance from local residents, the closure of two nineteenth-century elementary schools on the windward side of the island.⁴⁰ In 1962, superintendent Charles Minnich tried to implement these recommendations. The high school principal, a Nantucket native who had long kept her teachers untethered and cowed, threatened to resign over the matter and large crowds began attending meetings in her support.⁴¹ Teachers soon complained that students were tape-recording their lectures, and right-wing literature appeared in the school library. A local women’s club called for the resignation of Minnich and several high school teachers. By the end of the year conservatives won a plurality on the school committee and fired him.⁴²

Minnich became a martyr for organized labor and delivered the keynote address at the NEA’s national convention that year.⁴³ The Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) responded to the Nantucket situation with a boycott, which prevented members from applying for jobs in the district. The organization claimed that the local mind-set was “sterile, steeped in parochialism and self-destruction.” In addition to isolated living conditions, the MTA contended, teachers on Nantucket faced “‘unreasonable’ teaching assignments, parental harassment, ‘vicious’ public rumors, an unsympathetic school commit-

tee, lack of public respect, and improper supervision."⁴⁴ The state's department of education took a moderate approach to the standoff, promising not to "become involved in the activities of professional teaching groups" but also to keep the schools open with nonunionized teachers if necessary.⁴⁵ The school committee did just that. In subsequent years it refused to negotiate with the union, fired Minnich's successor rather than give him tenure, and dismissed a teacher after her interracial marriage. Only when concerned parents began sending their children to mainland schools did community leaders work to improve relations with the school faculty.⁴⁶

At the national level, the NEA's use of boycotts and sanctions faltered in 1967, when Florida legislators refused to raise educational subsidies and remained intransigent in the face of thousands of teacher resignations. The union had to scale back its funding demands and many teachers lost their jobs. By the end of the decade, the failure of statewide action forced the NEA to shift its attention back to local districts and to loosen its position on strikes. Without the threat of work stoppage, collective bargaining had largely failed to improve working conditions, contract violations, or low pay. Local associations began to defy strike injunctions and pushed the national leadership to embrace a more confrontational defense of teachers' rights. Rising militancy might have jeopardized the NEA's professional reputation but it dramatically increased membership, which exceeded 2 million by the mid-1970s. Teacher strikes soon became a fixture of municipal politics, occurring at a rate of over a hundred a year.⁴⁷

Strikes were rare but not unheard of in small school districts.⁴⁸ Although they remained illegal in most states, between 1960 and 1975 there were almost five hundred work stoppages in districts with two hundred teachers or fewer (see fig. 2). Some of these were part of statewide actions, taking place in working-class suburbs of Pittsburgh, Detroit, or other strongholds of organized labor. Those of local origin had causes as diverse as the communities themselves, but usually resulted from some combination of overcrowding, poor working conditions, and rising professionalization rather than simply salary or benefits disputes. Finally, and significantly, the most divisive strikes often occurred immediately after a community experienced school consolidation or an influx of suburban growth.

An early example comes from Portola Valley, a farming district south of San Mateo, California, with only eight grades and 30 teachers but a growing number of commuters from a nearby defense plant. In 1960, the district narrowly voted to fire its superintendent, who was a proponent of residential development and progressive teaching styles, both points of contention with the rural school board. In response, the faculty staged a one-day protest strike.⁴⁹ Their demonstration divided the community. The board members who orchestrated the superintendent's removal were voted out of office, but other residents re-

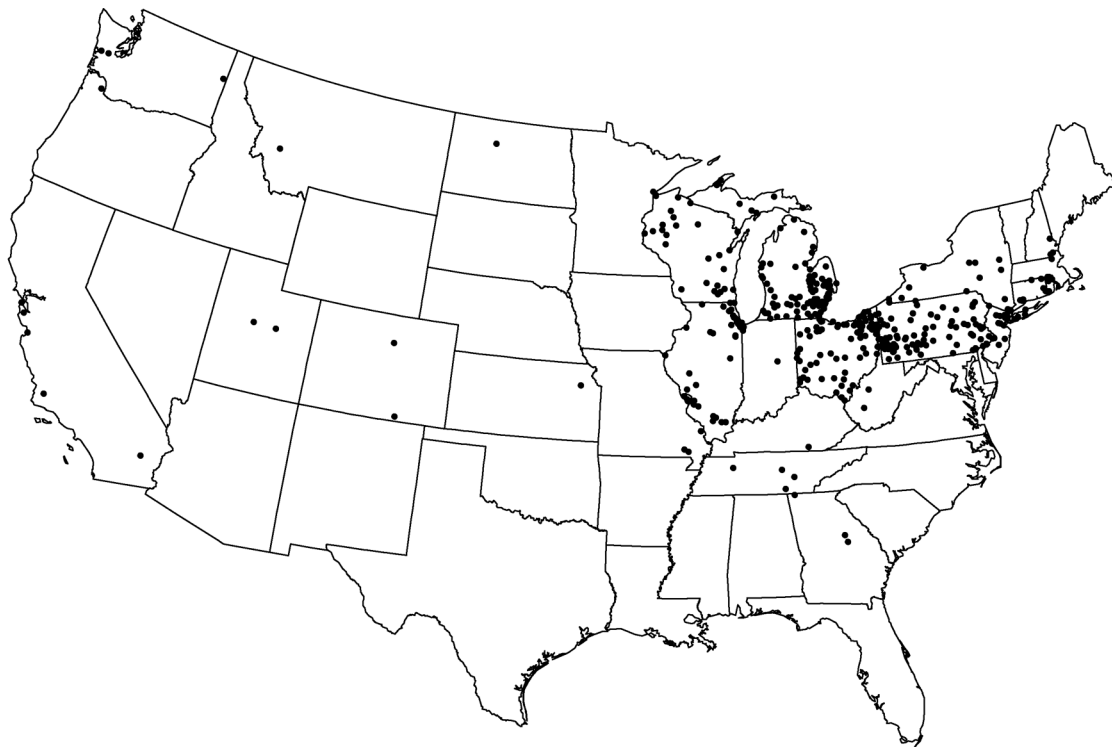


FIG. 2.—Strikes of 200 teachers or fewer, 1960–75

peatedly tried to sue the teachers for violating their contracts.⁵⁰ In a similar case, after the resort town of Union Beach, New Jersey, opened its first high school to accommodate a rise in year-round residents, the school board denied a social studies teacher tenure without explanation. The New Jersey Education Association responded with sanctions, encouraging resignations among the district's faculty and hampering the recruitment of replacement teachers. The state's Supreme Court took the board to task for its behavior but nevertheless upheld an injunction against the union, concluding that sanctions were no different than a coordinated strike and were thus illegal.⁵¹

In 1967, New York passed the Taylor Law, which allowed public employees to organize and established protocols for mediation and fact-finding but prohibited strikes and granted municipal authorities the right to impose unilateral settlements, ensuring that power resided with the school board. A year later the faculty of Greenburgh, a recently consolidated district in Westchester County, voted to affiliate with the state teachers' union. One teacher recalled that contract negotiations had previously been an informal, amicable affair. But any hope of a "'negotiations 'honeymoon' was shattered [during] the next contract talks," she continued, "when we had to deal with a hired board negotiator, and felt really taken advantage of."⁵² Unwilling to cede further ground on salary or bargaining rights, and frustrated at the board's stonewalling, Greenburgh became one of several suburban districts to challenge the Taylor Law. In 1973, the teachers waged a successful 13-day strike, for which they were severely fined but also won a 10% raise and formal grievance procedure.⁵³

One of the era's most infamous strikes occurred in Hortonville, Wisconsin, a community of about fifteen hundred residents located in the Fox River Valley, near Appleton. In 1973, control of the town's public schools still rested with the "old timers," a group of farmers and small industrialists that included owners of the local paper mill and toy factory. Like most towns in the valley, one observer quipped, "the money was in the mill, and the mill controlled the school board, and the rest of the people . . . were employees of the mill." However, an increasingly white-collar workforce and expanding suburbs had begun to strain these provincial politics. The local high school, built to accommodate consolidated rural districts in 1960, proved unequal to subsequent population growth in the adjoining town of Greenville, where young families and Appleton commuters filled new subdivisions.⁵⁴ Overcrowding forced high school art classes to meet in the elementary school, and administrators planned to lengthen the school day by 2 hours to accommodate double shifts.⁵⁵ Frustration mounted on all sides as rural voters—still a majority and upset with their rising property taxes—rejected school bond referenda 3 years in a row. Teacher salaries fell almost a thousand dollars below those in Appleton, and the district began the 1973 school year without a contract.⁵⁶

The newly formed Hortonville Education Association (HEA), which resented all 84 of the district's teachers, pressed the board for an impartial fact-finding session throughout the fall.⁵⁷ Once convened, however, both sides rejected its recommendations. The board did not present an acceptable contract until early February, at which time the HEA insisted that the terms extend for 2 years to prevent similar stalling in the future. When the board refused, the teachers demanded binding arbitration. The board refused that as well. "We would not go to binding arbitration," declared board president Roger Weiling. "People in the school district are the ones that pay the taxes, they elect us, they should be the ones that tell us how they want the schools run." Union members accused him of cloaking obstinacy with principle, grumbling that rural districts would rather cling to the concept of local control than bargain with their teachers. As the rhetoric escalated, meetings grew long and tempers short, and the teachers struck on March 18, 1974.⁵⁸

At the time it was illegal for public employees to strike in Wisconsin, but the practice was becoming increasingly common. The state's collective bargaining law required good faith in negotiations but included no penalties for school boards that did not comply, leaving the threat of an illegal strike as a last resort for teachers. From 1972 to 1974 there were over three hundred Wisconsin districts with outstanding contracts through October, 30 of which suffered official strikes.⁵⁹ A WEAC negotiator remarked that although "farmers had acted the same way" in two small-town strikes the previous year, both communities had resolved their differences in a matter of weeks. Everyone expected a similar outcome in Hortonville, but hopes for a quick resolution proved illusory.⁶⁰

After substitutes monitored classes in late March, the schools closed for 3 weeks while the union picketed and the board scheduled disciplinary hearings for breach of contract.⁶¹ When the HEA refused individual hearings, the board obliged them by firing all 84 members at once and reopening the schools with replacement teachers, primarily young or recently retired women lured by the promise of a \$45 daily stipend. The picket line grew tense with the appearance of these "scabs." Five hundred teachers from around the state forfeited their spring break and traveled to Hortonville in a show of solidarity. Rather than simply circling the school, they marched downtown, obstructing traffic and occupying local businesses. The police arrested 71 strikers by mid-April.⁶²

The town already harbored a general hostility to the teachers, three-quarters of whom lived outside the district and held tenure of less than 10 years. To many residents the arrival of more "outsiders" represented an organized offensive against local prerogative. Rumors spread that the strikers condescendingly referred to the board as "those farmers," that they were intent on "wrecking the community" and were "talking about crippling our little village." One man recalled that "a big shot in the W.E.A.[C] . . . came in here, stood right in front

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of the high school and said, 'We're going to bust this little town right in two. This little village is going to be nothing but a scarecrow nest in two years.'"⁶³

Numerous residents, informed by right-wing pamphlets, said that they saw "the influence of [community organizer Saul] Alinsky" in the teachers' bargaining tactics. "Teachers in Hortonville [had] been attending meetings," one mill owner remembered, "as many as five meetings a week, and after that experience they all started thinking the same. . . . A lot of people were using that word, 'brainwashed'—that very word." He believed that "[union] leadership was manipulating these teachers, and that the strike didn't speak to working conditions at all but to leadership manipulation."⁶⁴ Many townspeople blamed a hazily defined "leadership" for starting the strike, saying that "they" . . . were going to have a strike in Appleton, but the Appleton school board capitulated, and so they chose Hortonville," or that "'they' lost in Wisconsin Rapids and they thought they'd win in Hortonville because they thought it was a smaller community."⁶⁵ A high school senior agreed that HEA members "became radical" because they were "being advised" by outsiders. With a metaphor that would have set his English teacher's teeth on edge, he proclaimed that they "were guinea pigs [who] got sold up the river!"⁶⁶

A group of unemployed youths soon took matters into their own hands and formed the Hortonville Vigilante Association—its name a parody of the union's—to defend local bars. Striking teachers found their houses vandalized, with "lights shot out and rocks through [their] windows" and their car tires slashed.⁶⁷ Some vigilantes began brandishing broom- or axe-handles and unloaded guns while making forays into the HEA's headquarters.⁶⁸ The county sheriff arrested one of them for sending threatening letters and religious messages to the leader of a pronoun parent group, shortly after a local minister had issued a sermon and pamphlet calling down "divine punishment" upon the strikers.⁶⁹ On March 25, school board member Floyd Meyer, in a frustrated attempt to exit the school parking lot, hit the HEA's chief negotiator with his car, for which the man was briefly hospitalized. At least two other picketers also reported automobile collisions.⁷⁰ As the overwhelmed sheriff's department struggled to keep the peace, it deputized officers from five surrounding counties and even pleaded for a mobilization of the National Guard.⁷¹

The acrimony made for tense working conditions. Every morning, Hortonville's replacement teachers met at an empty barn along the highway, where a convoy of farmers would guard their cars and drive them to and from the schools, which they entered on foot and under guard, subjected to a barrage of invective from the strikers.⁷² The arrival of strange, inexperienced teachers ensured that the atmosphere within the classroom was almost as chaotic as without. One group of third-grade boys, although sharply divided on the validity of the strike itself, expressed a universal dislike for their new teacher and

bragged about throwing clay at her.⁷³ A team of negotiators found the elementary school “destroyed from the inside out,” with bulletin boards knocked down, filth on the science room floor, modeling clay strewn around, and thousands of dollars of broken equipment. High school students, too, engaged in widespread vandalism.⁷⁴

Most of the strikebreakers quit under the strain, some after a single day, and the school board faced a perpetual shortage of qualified instructors. Two hundred and forty replacements were used to fill the 84 positions, some coming from distances of 80 miles or more. Wisconsin state superintendent Barbara Thompson voiced strong support for the board. Although she denied that the Department of Public Instruction supplied them with lists of replacements, pointing out that her department’s job was merely “to carefully check the replacements’ certification,” she did not do that either, repeatedly waiving state certification requirements.⁷⁵ In April a group of parents, mostly from suburban Greenville, withdrew 49 students from the school system to attend an alternative school operated by striking teachers. They also mounted a taxpayers’ lawsuit to force arbitration and an amicable reopening of the schools.⁷⁶

As spring came, the controversy became the purview of the courts. On May 6, the Outagamie County Court ordered the district to rehire all the teachers for the final month of school but allowed the school board to list any teachers it would not ask back the next year: “a decision,” protested the HEA, “that in effect . . . bused the union.” The teachers appealed to the Wisconsin Supreme Court, which maintained the illegality of the strike but agreed with the union that the board did not have the right to fire teachers without due process.⁷⁷ The school board appealed this decision to the US Supreme Court, which reversed it again, finding that a democratically elected board was well within its rights to fire illegal strikers, whether or not it was negotiating with them at the time and regardless of bargaining customs.⁷⁸

Although the incident ended with a nominal victory for the Hortonville school board and local control, it is usually remembered as a victory for labor. Wisconsin’s governor cited the Hortonville conflict as “evidence that the present law prohibiting strikes by public employees does not work” and threatened that future strikes “would extend the crisis to the boundaries of the state.” With his backing, the legislature passed a law requiring arbitration in future labor disputes.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the Supreme Court decision represented a valuable precedent for Hortonville. When the teachers hired during the strike tried to form a new union, the board squelched the effort. In fact, the town’s teachers did not reestablish union affiliation until 2003, and then joined the WFT rather than WEAC. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the court decision stemmed the tide of union organizing in other towns as well, and that school boards became more aggressive negotiators in the years after Hortonville. From farming com-

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munities to the Milwaukee suburbs, several union members recall conservative groups trying to intimidate them with the warning, "Remember Hortonville!"⁷⁸⁰

A Mixed Legacy: Public Sector Labor Law

Just as the Hortonville strike reached its apex, a similar incident wracked Plaisow, New Hampshire, a quickly growing rural area near the Massachusetts border, where, from February to December 1974, the faculty of the Timberlane Regional School District sustained the longest strike in American educational history. Although the district's salaries were near the state average, its teachers' association struck for rights of collective bargaining and outside arbitration. Union leaders complained that the school board clung to "a 1930s concept that they [had] the right to be judge, prosecutor, and jury" rather than engage in professional mediation. The board retorted that if "some third party" interfered with town politics, voters would "lose control [and] the good old apple pie image of home rule is going out the window." After a contentious round of negotiations, the board replaced the strikers with substitutes and the state department of education permanently decertified them, following guidelines established after a strike in Salem, New Hampshire, the year before. While the board's most outspoken supporters seem to have been farmers, townspeople divided on the strike's legitimacy. As one woman remembered, the issue "split the community . . . [and] it changed friendships."⁷⁸¹

The New Hampshire Supreme Court eventually ruled in favor of the board, finding that elected representatives had the right to fire illegally striking teachers and were not obliged to submit to arbitration. Beyond the particulars of the case, however, the Court offered some hope to the state's teacher unions: it revoked the permanent decertification of strikers, for example, and dismissed the board's contention that injunctions should automatically apply at the outset of a strike. In hopes of avoiding future incidents, the state legislature soon expanded provisions for collective bargaining and, as in Hortonville, the incident became a nominal victory for labor. Teachers from Timberlane and Hortonville marched to the NEA's national convention in Chicago that year, where they became the *cause célèbre*. Yet in Plaisow itself the outcome was less encouraging. None of the strikers were rehired after their suspension. And although their replacements formed another bargaining unit, the school board limited its negotiating power to salary and benefits, making no provisions for binding arbitration. Political analysts also credited the reelection of conservative governor Meldrim Thomson to his outspoken support of the Timberlane board.⁸²

The mixed legacy of the Timberlane case is representative of public labor law generally during the 1960s and 1970s. In the face of growing teacher militancy,

legislation that permitted collective bargaining but prohibited strikes seemed increasingly unworkable. Yet state and federal judges struggled to craft a new jurisprudence to handle union disputes. They generally sought to preserve local democratic control while reining in overzealous school boards and legislators. By the late 1970s, most judges cited the *Timberlane* decision—together with earlier rulings from *Holland*, *Michigan* (1968) and *Westerly*, *Rhode Island* (1973)—when weighing penalties for illegal strikes.⁸³ The emerging consensus was that states could prohibit strikes but school boards could not summarily fire teachers, and that courts were bound to issue injunctions against strikers only in cases of fraud or violence. The result, predictably, was a more permissive attitude, and in many states more permissive legislation, toward striking.⁸⁴

Courts also began, gingerly, to subject school boards to outside arbitration. In 1974, for example, the Vermont Supreme Court compelled the town of Danville to accept an arbitrator's recommendations in a contract dispute, a measure already stipulated in the district's contract but ignored under the assumption that judges would defer to local officials.⁸⁵ The Massachusetts Supreme Court likewise ordered mediation for a teacher who was arbitrarily denied tenure in the Danvers school district, northwest of Salem. "Although a school committee may not surrender its authority to make tenure decisions," the ruling asserted, "there is no reason why a school committee may not bind itself to follow certain procedures precedent to the making of any such decision."⁸⁶ These rulings did not explicitly shift power from school boards to labor unions—they merely sought to ensure fairness and compliance with established procedures—but as other states cited them in their own jurisprudence the effect was the same.

Courts established other professional protections as well. In *Lockport*, *Illinois*, the construction of two new schools in the early 1960s met resistance from local voters, who rejected a bond referendum and, after it eventually passed, voted down the taxes necessary to staff the schools.⁸⁷ When the teachers' union printed letters to the local newspaper criticizing tight-fisted board members, the board fired Marvin Pickering, a signatory, for insubordination. In 1968, the US Supreme Court reinstated him, ruling that the First Amendment gave teachers the right to speak about school board policy publicly and without reprisal, so long as their comments did not impede student learning or demonstrably hurt faculty morale.⁸⁸ By the early 1980s, cases from outlying communities in Texas and California established similar precedents for the abolition of "captive audience meetings," which school boards used to discourage union activities but state courts found impermissibly coercive. Whereas courts had once equated a well-ordered democracy with the fealty of public workers, by the 1970s the excesses of small-district school boards seemed to contradict acceptable labor practices and to demand judicial intervention on the teachers' behalf.⁸⁹

Yet notions of fairness remained malleable in a rapidly changing legal environment, especially as judges realized that their rulings both responded to and

determined political realities on the ground. While indiscriminate treatment of teachers seemed increasingly indefensible, efforts to restrain school boards and respect traditions of local control prompted repeated reversals and clarifications. To cite one example, in 1972, the New York Court of Appeals wrote that labor arbitration was “part and parcel of the administration of grievances” and had to be honored by both teachers and board members. But just 5 years later, the same court reversed course. In a case out of Liverpool, a small town near Syracuse, it found that arbitrators “[did] not carry the same historical or general acceptance” as school boards and that it was not satisfied with “the efficacy of arbitration as a means for resolving controversies in government employment.” Only gradually, in a series of minor rulings, did New York’s judiciary apply arbitration rules to local school boards.⁹⁰

Federal courts also vacillated on the appropriate balance between worker protection and local democracy, particularly as Nixon and Ford appointees made the judiciary more conservative. Typical was the Supreme Court’s handling of the Fair Labor Standards Amendment (FLSA) of 1961, which extended federal wage standards to workers in schools and hospitals and was strongly supported by teachers’ unions. In *Maryland v. Wirtz* (1968), the Court upheld the amendment, writing that so long as legislation “established only minimum wages and maximum hours . . . and did not otherwise affect the manner in which schools and hospitals were managed” it was subject to federal regulation under the commerce clause.⁹¹ In *National League of Cities v. Usery* (1976), however, a more conservative group of justices reconsidered, arguing that the FLSA “impermissibly [interfered] with the integral governmental functions of such bodies” and would, in practice, impede local control of “traditional governmental functions.” The Court would later reverse course again, with *Garcia v. San Antonio Metropolitan Transit Authority* (1985), reestablishing the supremacy of federal labor laws, but the issue of local control remained contentious when applied to public workers.⁹²

Conclusion

Although teachers’ unions have enjoyed marked increases in membership and political influence over the past 50 years, the decline of private sector unions over the same period has transformed them from the labor movement’s latest addition to its last redoubt, raising the stakes in arguments about their legitimacy. Because those arguments draw on fundamentally different conceptions of democracy—the authority of voters versus the rights of teachers—their substance has remained largely unchanged since the 1960s. Teachers today, as then, find themselves under pressure from antitax groups bent on austerity measures, from parents worried about lax or controversial curriculum, and from politicians

who see them as impediments to democratic prerogative and public accountability. Also as in the 1960s, nominal rights to bargain, lobby, and strike remain subject to quick reverses, usually in the form of “right to work” legislation or other laws limiting the right of public workers to organize. The city of Chicago recently had a high-profile standoff with its teachers, and laws targeting public sector unions have been proposed in Michigan, Ohio, and other states.

The biggest difference between union disputes of the 1960s and today derives from the growing polarization of American politics. Whereas teacher organizations could once find support from liberals within either party, since 1976, when the NEA endorsed Jimmy Carter, they have become firmly aligned with Democrats. That alliance has given unions a degree of legitimacy and strengthened their ability to shape policy but has also heightened conflicts with other liberal constituencies—particularly civil rights groups, with whom they differ on issues of teacher accountability and school choice—while at the same time making them easy targets for increasingly conservative Republicans. At both state and national levels, then, unions find themselves on the defensive, competing for support from the left and resisting frontal attacks from the right.

The new partisan divide is hard to miss in Wisconsin, which has once again become a front line in the battle over teacher unionization. Thousands of people occupied the state capitol in the spring of 2011, hoping to prevent the passage of Act 10, a controversial measure weakening collective bargaining rights for the state’s public workers. The standoff between protesters, counterprotesters, and legislators broke not only along political lines, with Democrats rallying behind organized labor and Republican governor Scott Walker trying to weaken his opponents’ base, but along geographical lines as well, with affluent suburbs in the southeastern part of the state overwhelmingly supporting Act 10 and Madison and Milwaukee, the state’s largest urban centers, flatly rejecting it. Whatever swing votes there were came from rural areas, presenting small-town voters with essentially the same choice they faced 50 years earlier. Would they support teachers’ right to bargain?

As the capitol settled in for a prolonged struggle, Katherine Cramer Walsh, a political scientist and professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, ventured into the countryside to find out. She interviewed hundreds of rural, working-class voters and found, in many communities, that public school teachers were the highest-paid workers and the only ones with reliable access to health care and pensions. For the small-town residents that Walsh met, the benefits of unionization seemed remote; their costs, in the form of higher taxes and less control of school administration, were much clearer. While others were compelled to sacrifice, there was a perception that teachers were living high on public expense. Thus, while busloads of teachers from rural areas drove to the capitol to protest the attack on collective bargaining, voters back home gen-

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erally broke in the other direction. Despite some initial reservations, rural legislators remained unified in support of the Walker administration.⁹³

It is important to underscore that this outcome was never preordained, that rural voters and their representatives did not act with reflexive hostility to unions or an unmistakable loyalty to the Republican Party.⁹⁴ Support for Act 10 sprang from a commitment to community welfare and local democracy that unions were unable to articulate. Yet one could imagine a different outcome, one in which Wisconsin teachers protested less for their health benefits than for the fate of public education itself, and perhaps in which they could subordinate conflicts between local and professional prerogative. Almost unmentioned during the events of 2011 was the meaningless “flexibility” that Act 10 promised local school boards. For in addition to its antiunion measures, the Walker administration introduced a raft of laws that constrained school funding, including new property tax limits, drastic cuts to state subsidies, and millions of dollars diverted to an expanded school voucher program. Although targeted at profitable urban districts, the real victims of these policies have been rural schools. Rural districts “lack the resources to provide students with educational opportunities anywhere near those of our wealthier, suburban districts,” writes assemblyman Fred Clark, and schools in the countryside have been forced to rely on public referenda at rates significantly higher than elsewhere in the state.⁹⁵

The misfortune of rural school districts speaks to the declining population and political influence of rural communities in general, but it also suggests new possibilities for a usable past. For as conservatives shift their attention from local control to school choice—and as suburbanites ignore the outlying communities with whom they once identified—they discard a valuable tradition of democratic participation, now a cause with the potential to unite rural and urban areas as well as teachers and voters. Rural teachers may have an important role in contemporary politics, not because their concerns are distinct from those of urban teachers but because conservative policies have hurt the communities in which both groups work. Indeed, rural teachers’ lack of political power could actually make them stronger, less compromised spokesmen for the public good than their urban counterparts. But the change must begin in their home districts, where the antagonism between teachers and community members often runs deep, drawing from the same disagreements about professionalization that have dogged unions since their inception. The best way to overcome such hostility is to reaffirm teachers’ commitment to cooperative school governance. Americans are never likely to accept teachers’ unions outright, but insofar as the groups are both committed to educational quality, they should rally around the local pride and participation that lead to meaningful public oversight.

Notes

1. The foundational texts on teachers' unions are Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: The AFT & NEA, 1900–1980* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), and Wayne Urban, "Teacher Activism," in *American Teachers: Histories of a Profession at Work*, ed. Donald Warren (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 190–209. More recent scholarship includes Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Bronxville Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); Steve Golin, *The Newark Teacher Strikes: Hopes on the Line* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Dorothy Shipp, *School Reform, Corporate Style: Chicago, 1880–2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006); John F. Lyons, *Teachers and Reform: Chicago Public Education 1929–1970* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Christina Collins, "Ethnically Quilted": *Race, Merit, and the Selection of Urban Teachers, 1920–1980* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011); and Jonna Perrillo, *Until Rights: Teachers, Unions, and Race in the Battle for School Equity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). Also helpful for this period is Joseph A. McCartin, "Turnabout Years: Public Sector Unionism and the Fiscal Crisis," in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 210–26.
2. I define a "small district" as one with fewer than 200 faculty, a number inclusive both of remote, rural areas like Sequatchie County, Tennessee, and inner-ring suburbs like Garfield, New Jersey, but (as will be clear from the examples provided) generally representative of consolidated rural districts and growing exurban areas, and clearly exclusive of even small cities. A full accounting of the incidents described is available at "Lists of Strikes," box 2975, folder 14; and box 2984, folder 09, NEA Archives, George Washington University (hereafter cited as GWU).
3. In 1890, there were only 129 state education officials in the entire country, and the median number of employees in a state department of education was two. See David Strang, "The Administrative Transformation of American Education: School District Consolidation, 1938–1980," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (September 1987): 352–55; Tracy Steffes, *School, Society, and State: A New Education to Govern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 207.
4. *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to Present*, vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Overviews of school district consolidation include David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), chap. 1; Wayne Fuller, *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Andrew Gulliford, *America's Country Schools* (Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 1984); Paul Theobald, *Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995); David R. Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999); William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press); Hal S. Barron, *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation of the Rural North, 1870–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), chap. 2; and Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), chap. 2.

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5. Carl F. Kaestle and Alyssa E. Lodewick, eds., *To Educate a Nation: Federal and National Strategies of School Reform* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007); Adam R. Nelson, *The Elusive Ideal: Equal Educational Opportunity and the Federal Role in Boston's Public Schools, 1950–1983* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005); and David K. Cohen and Susan L. Moffitt, *The Ordeal of Equality: Did Federal Regulation Fix the Schools?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
6. On the connections between *Brown* and other aspects of educational law, as well as the uneven legacy of racial desegregation, see Nelson, *The Elusive Ideal*, James Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); James E. Ryan, *Five Miles Away, a World Apart: One City, Two Schools, and the Story of Educational Opportunity in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008).
7. Although he did not necessarily connect the two, educational reformer James Conant was an influential proponent of school consolidation and a critic of the racial and class segregation in urban areas. See Conant, *The American High School Today* (New York: Signet, 1964), and *Slums and Suburbs: A Commentary on Schools in Metropolitan Areas* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962).
8. *Milkien v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 717 (1974).
9. For a discussion of the Burger Court, see Bernard Schwartz, ed., *The Burger Court: Counter-Revolution or Confirmation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
10. For discussions of the rise and fall of New Deal labor policies, see Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010).
11. For the best overview of Wisconsin politics during this period, see William Fletcher Thompson, ed., *The History of Wisconsin* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1998), vol. 6; or James R. Donoghue, *The Local Government System of Wisconsin* (Madison: Wisconsin Blue Book, 1968).
12. See Myra H. Strober and David Tyack, "Why Do Women Teach and Men Manage? A Report on Research on Schools," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 3 (1980): 494–503.
13. By 1930, there were 172,000 members of the NEA and 7,000 of the AFT. See Murphy, *Blackboard Unions*, 277.
14. Historian Christine Ogren observes that most normal school students during this period were "from a small provincial town or village, experienced in the workforce as a teacher or a farmer, not well-off financially, and the first in the family to be educated beyond the common school." See Christine A. Ogren, "'A Large Measure of Self-Control and Personal Power': Women Students at State Normal Schools during the Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Centuries," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 28, nos. 3/4 (Fall–Winter 2000): 211–32. For a thorough description of the mixed effects of professionalization on rural pedagogy, see Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890–1980* (New York: Longman, 1984), 113–40.

15. Ellwood Cubberley, *Rural Life and Education: A Study of the Rural-School Problem as a Phase of the Rural-Life Problem* (1914), quoted in Kathleen Weiler, "Women and Social Reform: California, 1900–1940," *History of Education Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 31. For the NEA's positions on rural education, see Committee of Twelve on Rural Schools (1897), box 1236, folder 7; Committee of One Hundred on Rural Teacher's Problems (1926), box 1236, folder 3; "Educational Policies for Rural America" (1939), box 1049, folder 3; "Rural Education" (1959–68), box 2922, folder 18, NEA Records, GWU.
16. "Letter Says AEA Tries to 'Destroy' Smaller Schools," *Arkansas Gazette*, October 30, 1979, 4A. While union leadership almost always lobbied for consolidation, some smaller affiliates opposed measures that threatened their jobs. See Alan J. DeYoung, *The Life and Death of a Rural American High School: Foretwell, Little Kanawha* (New York: Garland, 1995), 196–97.
17. "Doubts Unruh School District Bill Will Pass," *San Mateo (Cal.) Times*, March 13, 1964, 3; "Report of the Committee on Tenure and Academic Freedom, 1950," box 2950, folder 6, NEA Archives, GWU.
18. "A Short History of the AFT," box 7, folder 2, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison (hereafter cited as WHS).
19. Angus B. Rothwell, *Forty-Second Biennial Report* (Madison: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1963–65), 180, 190.
20. See lists of locals in box 6, folder 1, as well as "Presidents of WFT Locals" and corresponding maps in box 7, folder 5, Wisconsin Federation of Teachers (WFT) Records, WHS.
21. Bethany Moreton documents a broad campaign by Wal-Mart and other companies to couple rural values with free-market, antiunion education programs. Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), chaps. 10–12. Frank Meinen to William Smeeth, April 18, 1963; Frank Meinen to William Smeeth, April 24, 1963; Robert N. Hahnstad to Frank Meinen, February 20, 1964; Frank Meinen to Project Action, June 5, 1961, box 6, folder 32; Frank Meinen to Phyllis Schlafly, January 23, 1962, box 6, folder 20, Frank Meinen Papers, WHS.
22. Oral history interview with Stanley teacher, tape 45/side 2; oral history with Bloomer teacher, tape 41/side 1; oral history with Ted Burns, tape 43/side 2, Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) Records, WHS.
23. Mrs. Peter J. Ruys to Mrs. Ruth Doyle, December 2, 1972, box 1, folder 9, Wisconsin Governor's Task Force, WHS.
24. Charlie Cheng to Wilson Nickles, October 3, 1967; John O. Linstead, "Imlay Head Start Appeal Raises Broad Question," *Flint Journal*, February 3, 1967, box 10, folder 08, Michigan Federation of Teachers Records, Pt. III, Ser. 2, Wayne State University, Detroit (hereafter cited as WSU).
25. Campbell F. Scribner, "Culture Wars in the Countryside: The Fight for Rural Schools," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 95, no. 2 (Winter 2011–12): 14–25.
26. "A Conflict between an Administrator and a Teachers' Organization," March 24, 1972, box 937, folder 06, NEA Archives, GWU; "Area's Population Continues to Rise," *Nashua (NH) Telegraph*, January 29 1972, 58.
27. "Memominee Sanctions Investigation," September 17, 1967, box 928, folder 04, NEA Archives, GWU.

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28. Rex Anderson, "A History of Millard Public Schools, 1946–1989: Forty-four Years of Suburban Growth" (MA thesis, University of Nebraska, 1997), 34, 50.
29. *Ibid.*, 24, 33, 38, 55.
30. *Ibid.*, 17.
31. *Ibid.*, 79, 199.
32. For a typical case from upstate New York, see Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman, *Small Town in Mass Society: Class, Power, and Religion in a Rural Community* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 174–75.
33. While one might speculate that rural voters would have supported the first measure and suburbanites the second, both passed with wide margins. See "School Head in Manchester Asked to Quit," *Bennington Banner*, November 20, 1961, 1; "Manchester to Vote on Enlarging School Board," *Bennington Banner*, February 9, 1962, 7; Lee Harrison, "Solutions to Age-Old Mr. Anthony Problems Now Seem to Converge from All Directions," *Bennington Banner*, September 27, 1977, 16.
34. "Solon Sees Year of Revolution in Idaho Education Programs," box 893, folder 5; Elmer Crowley to Richard Kennan, January 10, 1964; Elmer Crowley to Owen Love, March 26, 1964; Elmer Crowley to Richard Kennan, April 30, 1964, box 893, folder 2, NEA Archives, GWU.
35. DecAnn Grove, "'Be Assured That You Do Not Stand Alone': Iowa's Only Teachers' Strike, Keokuk, Iowa, 1970" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the History of Education Society, Philadelphia, October 22–25, 2009).
36. Jane A. Rahberg to Hugh Kahler, February 2, 1960, box 05, folder 08, Michigan Federation of Teachers Records, Pt. III, Ser. 2, WSU.
37. Murphy, *Blackboard Unions*, 227.
38. Marshall O. Donley, *Poetry to the Teacher: How America's Educators Became Militant* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 80–86.
39. Oral history interview with Reverend Ted Anderson, Nantucket Historical Society, tape 1 / side B. Transcript available at <http://www.nha.org/library/oralhistory/anderson.html>.
40. *Nantucket's Public Schools: A Report of an Independent Study* (Nantucket: Nantucket Town Board, 1957), 18.
41. Only two teachers had been approved for tenure since the 1940s. Most, unable to afford permanent housing because of inflated summer rents, had to live in cellars or rented rooms.
42. Gene Curritvan, "N.E.A. Educators Have Warned of Extremist Efforts in Schools," *New York Times*, July 2, 1965, 10.
43. Charles Minnich, "It Can Happen in Your Town," box 851, folder 01, NEA Archives, GWU.
44. "Weak Schools Invite Extremists," *Bennington Banner*, February 13, 1965, 4; "Teacher Assn. Warns of Nantucket Boycott Action," *North Adams (MA) Transcript*, December 7, 1964, 3.
45. "Kiernan Announces 'Our First Concern' Children in Nantucket Teacher Dispute," *North Adams (MA) Transcript*, February 4, 1966, 5.

46. "Nannuckel Fires Another School Superintendent," *Laurel (MA) Sun*, March 28, 1967, 3; "Teacher Claims Wedding a Black Got Her Fired," *Berkshire (MA) Eagle*, December 31, 1969, 3.
47. Murphy, *Blackboard Unions*, 229; Donley, *Power to the Teacher*, chap. 8.
48. What might have been the first teachers' strike in American history took place in 1920, when seven one-room schoolteachers in Jasper County and Sioux County, Iowa, conspired to cancel classes. Coordinated work stoppages also occurred sporadically in the 1930s and 1940s, especially in rural areas with sympathetic coal miners or other unionized workers. See "Educational Employees on Strike," 1947, box 2975, folder 14, NEA Records, GWU; Dan Goldner, "First Teacher Strike in U.S., 1920?" History of Education, H-NET listserve, posted December 2, 2011, available through word search at <http://h-net.msu.edu>.
49. "Portola Vote Defeats Bonds," *San Mateo (CA) Times*, June 15, 1960, 6; "Portola Valley School Advance," July 8, 1960, 17; "Teachers Go on 'Illness' at Portola," May 27, 1961, 2.
50. "Portola to Permit Rose to Resign," *San Mateo (CA) Times*, May 13, 1961, 11; "Can Parents Sue School?" June 16, 1961, 17; "Judge Rose Dismisses School Suit," March 28, 1962, 4; "Teacher Suit Filed Again," April 18, 1962, 35.
51. *Board of Education, Borough of Union Beach v. New Jersey Education Association*, 53 N.J. 29, 247 A.2d 867 (1968).
52. Phyllis Brown, "My First Ten Years—a Dream Deferred," *Action Bulletin* (March 1975), Greenburgh Teachers Federation (GTF) Records, WHS.
53. Charles Hanley, "Battle-Weary Taylor Law Will Undergo Scrutiny by State," *Ontonio (NY) Star*, October 10 1973, 7; Mildred Zimmerman, "President's Message," *Action Bulletin* (February 1974), GTF Records, WHS.
54. Oral history interview with Donald Dickinson, tape 14/side 1, WEAC Records, WHS.
55. "Extended Hortonville School Day Likely Because of Space Shortages," *Appleton Post-Crescent*, March 16, 1974, 1.
56. "Emotions as Well as Issues Led to Hortonville Impasse," *Capital Times*, April 29, 1974, 1.
57. With no unionization of small industry in the region, the Hortonville Education Association (HEA) was also the town's only organized workforce, adding another layer of tension to the situation.
58. "Emotions as Well as Issues Led to Hortonville Impasse," *Capital Times*, April 29, 1974, 1.
59. Darryl Holter, *Workers and Unions in Wisconsin: A Labor History Anthology* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1999), 240–41.
60. Oral history interview with Morris Andrews, tape 8/side 1; oral history interview with Don Krahn, tape 4/side 1, WEAC Records, WHS; Holter, *Workers and Unions*, 240–41.
61. "Hortonville to Halt Classes for Hearings with Teachers," *Appleton Post-Crescent*, March 30, 1974, 1.

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62. Holter, *Workers and Unions*, 241–42.
63. Interview with vigilantes, tape 56/ side 1; Morris Andrews, tape 8/ side 1, WEAC Records, WHS.
64. Tape 51/ side 1, WEAC Records, WHS.
65. Interview with vigilantes, tape 56/ side 1, WEAC Records, WHS.
66. Interview with mill owner's family, tape 55/ side 1, WEAC Records, WHS.
67. Oral history interview with Jean Wall and Mike Wisniski, tape 39/ side 2, WEAC Records, WHS.
68. Interview with vigilantes, tape 56/ side 1, WEAC Records, WHS.
69. Bill Knutson, "Lengthy Bargaining Talks on Strike Fail to Get Results," *Appleton Post-Crescent*, March 28, 1974, 1.
70. Bill Knutson, "School Delayed by Snow," *Appleton Post-Crescent*, March 25, 1974, 1; Oral history interview with two unidentified Greenfield teachers, tape 38/ side 1, WEAC Records, WHS.
71. Holter, *Workers and Unions*, 242.
72. Mike Dorgan, "The 'Sub,'" *Capital Times*, 29 April 1974, 1; oral history interview with Morris Andrews, tape 8/ side 1, WEAC Records, WHS.
73. Tape 50/ side 1, WEAC Records, WHS.
74. Oral history interview with Jean Wall and Mike Wisniski, tape 39/ side 2, WEAC Records, WHS.
75. Almost a third of the replacements did not hold teaching licenses, two of them had been convicted of crimes, and several others were parents or community members, yet at no point did Thompson cut off the town's funding, as required by state law. For more on the role of the DPL in the strike, see Richard Haws, "Mrs. Thompson Against State Sympathy Strike," *Wisconsin State Journal*, April 24, 1974, 1; Holter, *Workers and Unions*, 242–43.
76. Holter, *Workers and Unions*, 242; oral history interview with Jean Wall and Mike Wisniski, tape 39/ side 2, WEAC Records, WHS.
77. "Judge Tells Hortonville to Give Strikers Jobs," *Capital Times*, May 6, 1974, 1.
78. Holter, *Workers and Unions*, 242–43.
79. Owen Coyle and Matt Pommer, "Lucey Opposes State Teacher Walkout," *Capital Times*, April 24, 1974, 1; Holter, *Workers and Unions*, 243.
80. David I Bednarek, "Union's Survival Is Last Strike Issue," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 26, 1974, 1; oral history interview, Richland Center counselor, tape 43/ side 1, WEAC Records, WHS.
81. "No End in Sight to Teachers' Strike at Timberlane," *Nashua (NH) Telegraph*, September 3, 1974, 14.
82. "New Hampshire Board Adopts Policy on Striking Teachers," *Nashua (NH) Telegraph*, January 23, 1975, 13; "Teachers in Timberlane Form Bargaining Units," *Nashua (NH) Telegraph*, December 23, 1974, 13.
83. Several legal analysts cited the Timberlane decision as the moment when the judicial system that had been "the primary vehicle for enforcing the strike proscription" commenced the "erosion of the legal sanctions against strikes." See, for example, Janice K. Rosenberg, "Teacher Strikes: A Proposed Solution," *Urban Law Annual* 16 (1979): 338.

84. *School Dist. for Holland v. Holland Education Association*, 380 Mich. 314, 321, 157 N.W.2d 206, 208 (1968); *Rockwell v. Board of Education*, 393 Mich. 314, 326, 157 N.W.2d 206, 210 (1968); *School Committee v. Westerly Teachers Association*, III R.I. 96, 104, 299 A.2d 441, 446 (1973); *Public Sector Labor Law and Collective Bargaining* (Dearborn, MI: Institute of Continuing Legal Education, 1976), 204, 270–72. For subsequent references to the Timberlane case, see Joseph R. Grodin, June M. Weisberger, and Martin H. Malin, *Public Sector Employment: Cases and Materials* (St. Paul, MN: Labor Law Group, 2004), 296.
85. *Danville Board of Directors v. Figgeld*, 132 VT 271, 276, 315 A.2d 473, 474 (1974); Rosenberg, “Teacher Strikes,” 337.
86. Grodin et al., *Public Sector Employment*, 390.
87. *County and City Data Book: A Statistical Abstract Supplement* (Washington, DC: US Department of Commerce, 1949, 1967, 1972).
88. *Pickering v. Board of Education*, 391 US 563 (1968).
89. Grodin et al., *Public Sector Employment*, 170.
90. *Board of Education v. Associated Teacher of Huntington*, 30 N.Y. 2d 122, 331 NYS 2s 17, 282 N.E.2d 109 (1972); *Acting Sup’t v. United Liverpool Faculty Association* (1977). A series of minor rulings over the next decade diluted that decision, as arbitration slowly became the norm. See Grodin et al., *Public Sector Employment*, 374–75.
91. *Maryland v. Wirtz*, 392 U.S. 183; 88 S. Ct. 2017; 20 L. Ed. 2d 1020 (1968).
92. *National League of Cities v. Usery*, 426 U.S. 833; 96 S. Ct. 2465 (1976); *Garcia v. San Antonio Metropolitan Transit Authority*, 469 U.S. 528 (1985). See also, McCartin, “Turnabout Years,” 217.
93. Katherine Cramer Walsh, “What the Hell Is Going on in Madison?” Available at *The Monkey Cage*, http://themonkeycage.org/blog/2011/03/01/what_in_the_hell_is_going_on_i/. Appropriately, the loss of bargaining rights finally compelled Wisconsin’s NEA and AFT chapters to merge, a rift that had lingered since the “strikebreakers” in Hortonville affiliated with the WFT in 2003. See Stephen Sawchuk, “More Mergers for NEA, AFT Affiliates,” *Edweek*, February 19, 2013. Available at <http://www.edweek.org/cw/articles/2013/02/20/2lmerge.h32.html?ken=TLMEFN5MDL9DjKmlqAeGSNAh%2FuzPX Px6PE&cmp=cjp-edweek>.
94. There was audible dissent from some rural Republicans, for whom Dale Schultz (R-Richland Center) became the de facto spokesman.
95. Fred Clark, “Time to Take a Stand for Rural Schools,” *Capital Times*, June 11, 2014, 30.

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